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Advertising: Structure, Agency or Agencement?

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Scene A: Sterling Cooper Creative team meeting 3.28-4.16

Ken Why do moms give treats, there's no good reason?

Salvatore My mom would come out to the truck with us, she'd break the popsicles in half and give it to us like Jesus at the Last Supper

Ken Sounds cheap

Peggy No my mother did it too, it was great.

Ken In Vermont we made our own icecream – it was a pain in the ass

Peggy Everyone breaks Popsicles in half

Ken So?

Peggy you can do it all year round; the ritual, it's like communion

Ken it's kind of Catholic, isn't it?

Peggy it's Christian, as in behaviour, not religion, let me tell you something the Catholic church know how to sell things...

Scene B: Sterling Cooper pitch to Popsicle client 24.59-26.30

Peggy When I was little my mother would take a twin pop and break it in half and give one to me and one to my sister, we were completely equal in her eyes, beloved. Everyone does this with popsicles, but they may not realize what it means, it has nothing to do with an ice-cream truck on a hot summer day or the flavour or the colour, it's a ritual; you *take it, break it, share it, love it* [unveils artwork showing a Jesus Christ- like mom dispensing popsicles]

Popsicle client people do do that

Peggy this act of sharing is what a Popsicle is, it's the same treat from the freezer as it is from the truck, I don't care if it's snowing or if it's a hundred degrees, you can still *take it, break it, share it, love it*

Popsicle client [looking at the artwork] I like the way she's handing out the pops, the kids are excited, but the mom reminds me of something

Peggy No, this is original

Popsicle client Well, I can tell you this now, but we wanted something with the word love in it, when I ask the first thing people say is 'I love popsicles'.

Source: *Mad Men*, Season 2, Episode 12, The Mountain King

Scene A: Sterling Cooper Creative team meeting

Peggy Everyone breaks Popsicles in half
Ken So?
Peggy you can do it all year round; the ritual, it's like communion
Ken it's kind of Catholic, isn't it?
Peggy it's Christian, as in behaviour, not religion, let me tell you something the Catholic church know how to sell things...

Scene B: Sterling Cooper pitch to Popsicle client

Peggy When I was little my mother would take a twin pop and break it in half and give one to me and one to my sister, we were completely equal in her eyes, beloved. Everyone does this with popsicles, but they may not realize what it means, it has nothing to do with an ice-cream truck on a hot summer day or the flavour or the colour, it's a ritual; you *take it, break it, share it, love it* [unveils artwork showing a Jesus Christ- like mom dispensing popsicles]
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Source: *Mad Men*, Season 2, Episode 12, The Mountain King

They might be the stuff of television drama but these scenes from cable network AMC's show *Mad Men* pack in a lot of clues for media managers and workers about creative advertising practice, and about what a sociological perspective¹ can bring to an understanding of advertising processes. In this short chapter I'm going to refer to these scenes in an attempt to offer a sociological account of how creative advertising works, both as a media practice and as a market device.

There is no shortage of social theories that could be brought to bear to account for what is

going on in these two short scenes and you wouldn't have to be too far advanced in a sociological education to see that there is more at play here than straightforward selling. In invoking religion, maternal care and childhood memories Peggy locates her Popsicle pitch, subtly, but quite directly, in a social world. In doing so she creates a pitch with some punch but she also, as far as centuries of critics, sociologists and other commentators are concerned, does something else. What that something else is has been construed in a variety of different ways and while there is not the space here to do justice to the nuances within the long history of advertising critique², at core it seems to involve a transfer or exchange between one realm and another.

This transfer is what Samuel Johnson was getting at when he remarked in the eighteenth century on the 'improper disposition' of advertisements in combining the noble with the mundane and it is what has exercised a range of twentieth century scholars who have derived inspiration from Marx's thesis on commodity fetishism to explain what advertising, especially creative or persuasive advertising, does³. At the crudest level, a value or quality which properly belongs in one place is imported into another in the service of commercial strategy. Advertising has been conceived as a mediator, a 'bridge' which permits or encourages transfer between different 'places' allowing, for example, cultural, aesthetic, social or psychological qualities to 'turn up' in the economy. From a critical, sociological perspective this exchange has been construed as one with largely negative consequences including the devaluation of art and culture, the decline of social institutions, the manipulation of individual fears and anxieties, the promotion of narcissistic individualism and the encouragement of excessive consumption.⁴

This is a formidable burden of responsibility for advertising workers to shoulder and it clearly has some purchase judging by the accounts of former practitioners who have been drawn towards critical writing, and sometimes to critical action, through movements like

‘culture jamming’⁵. But while classic and contemporary critiques of advertising carry some weight, there is scarcely a consensus on advertising’s influence - negative or positive - or the degree to which advertising, rather than the market system it is located within, should be held responsible. Sociological critiques of advertising are, in any event, really critiques of market society both in the systemic and totalising overviews they offer and, more often than not, in their focus on the role and effects of advertising, generally, rather than its practices and processes, empirically.

This latter tendency to access advertising primarily through its texts or products, began to give way in the 1990s as part of a broader resurgence of sociological interest in the practices, processes and institutions which make up the economy.⁶ Turning to the economy and to a more empirical, more ethnographic, more practice-based approach however unsettles some well established ideas about advertising work. To characterise advertising as a bridging, mediating technology devised by ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu, 1984; Mcfall, 2002) relies upon a conception of whatever it is that advertising workers are transferring, blending or ‘hybridising’ with the economic – cultural, symbolic, aesthetic or social values- as properly belonging to separate spheres. From a Frankfurt School perspective advertising is a ‘culture industry’ which captures and transforms culture proper, into a mass-produced and debased form; while for social theorists like Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Beck, Giddens and Lash, advertising plays a lead role in blurring the boundaries between the cultural and economic ‘spheres’. The problem with this, as I’ve argued in detail elsewhere, is while the distinction between the cultural and the economic is conceptually useful, it is surprisingly tricky to sustain in concrete practice. There may be good reasons for defending the distinction but it is nevertheless an artificial one resulting from centuries of separating, intellectual work that has sought to enforce and maintain an abstract, conceptual division between spheres of activity. When it comes to practice the distinction collapses as the cultural, symbolic bits are all mixed

up with the commercial and economic. To return to the Popsicle example, Peggy may be importing childhood memories, religion and ideals of mothering to add symbolic values to the product but that doesn't change the fact that the Popsicle is already imbued with culture, meaning, significance, as a result of its history and its patterns of use. What makes Peggy's pitch successful is not that she's come up with an alluring but arbitrary cultural value, an 'improper disposition' or in Williamson's (1978) terms an exchange in the currency of signs – rather it is that she has selectively condensed appealing aspects of the intersecting histories of product, client and consumers in her pitch.

Advertising work is always, already cultural in that it involves representing and repackaging select aspects of the social world.⁷ Despite the manifest proximity to other forms of cultural production this is not just a characteristic of creative work but of media and account planning and management functions too. For this reason I have referred previously to all forms of advertising work as *constituent material practices* which are necessarily made up of cultural and economic elements and entirely contingent upon material factors; technologies, techniques, rules, conventions and budgets which substantially pattern the final advertising product. Thinking about advertising work as constituent in this way draws upon anthropological perspectives which reject the idea that the cultural and economic ever function in practice as pure, separate and autonomous realms. While it may go some way towards addressing the critical fascination with advertising as singularly to blame for mixing things up that should be kept separate; it arguably offers little else. Perhaps a more promising way of understanding the character of advertising work both sociologically, and from a media management perspective, lies in the renewed emphasis on the material.

To try and explain what I mean by this it's worth considering another way of thinking sociologically about how advertising production might work. Perhaps the most central of all sociological concerns is the relationship between individuals and social worlds, or more

conventionally that between agency and structure. At the risk of caricaturing, sociological thought classically divides between those concerned with action and agency on the one hand and those concerned with structure and structural constraint on the other. Returning to the scenes from *Mad Men* once more; a sociological account focused upon agency would light upon Peggy's individual drive and creative brilliance, her biography and reflexivity as the core factors shaping the campaign pitch; a more structural account on the other hand, would primarily stress institutional factors such as the relationship between the agency and the client and the over-riding need in a capitalist market society to create profit by whatever means necessary.

Admittedly, few sociologists would insist on either agency or structure as sole determinants of the social world - or indeed the campaign pitch – most would see them as interacting to greater or lesser extents. Still, this leaves the agency/structure dualism intact and, as has been argued elsewhere, it leaves sociology and social theory in the same blind alley that Norbert Elias remarked as long ago as 1939 (du Gay, 2008). Individuals (agents), Elias (2000/1939) maintained, do not stand outside society (structure) and society can not exist outside individuals. This seemingly obvious point is nevertheless frequently misunderstood. Elias is not just saying that the individual and society are related; his point is that they are part of the same whole; a network of interdependencies or 'figuration'. 'Individuals' and 'society' are processual outcomes – only by studying them empirically and materially is it possible to apprehend the ways in which the 'individual' is always also social.

This may seem a long way from thinking about the management of advertising work but maybe it's not. In recent years the upsurge in interest in refining a sociological understanding of the economy and economic practices has been reinforced by efforts to re-think the agency/structure dualism along more pragmatic, more material and more process-oriented lines. One of the more fruitful lines of enquiry arose initially from actor-network theory's

(ANT) attempt to rethink the sociological conception of the human agent as the prime source of social action. ANT, famously challenged the idea that agency, understood as the capacity to undertake voluntary willed action, could be contained in a human being⁸. Rather, agency was to be understood as materially endowed and distributed across networks of arrangements. Viewed this way, Peggy's idea may originate in Peggy, but its *translation* into a meaningful pitch/action involves materials, tools, equipment, organizational settings, the support of her agency colleagues etc. It is these material processes of translation which produce social outcomes. From an ANT perspective, meaningful action is best traced through what Law (1999: 4) called a 'semiotics of materiality'. Where traditional semiotics proceeded from the principle that social meaning is relational, the outcome of the spaces between representational signs, a semiotics of materiality explores the network of relations between *all* materials.

The implications of this are worth unravelling. What it suggests is that managing advertising work is not about managing the *transfer* of value or meaning from one sphere to another, nor about managing the relations between individuals and advertising structures. Rather it is about understanding the material and distributed nature of the work and the processes and translations between different participants involved in production. Viewed up close, advertising work may be composed of constituent material practices where culture-like bits are blended with economy-like bits using specific materials but this is not all there is to it. Equally significant are the shifting networks of organizational and institutional relations through which practitioners negotiate their work. Rather than thinking of these factors as the interaction of agency and structure, an empirical and process-oriented approach would define all these factors as party to the '*agencement*' of advertising.

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) used the term *agencement* as a way of staking out, philosophically, the necessary force of connections within the social fabric. In the wake of this Michel Callon (2005, 2007) among others⁹, has applied the term to the study of markets and

economic practices to emphasize the constitutive interconnections between ‘agencies’ with the capacity for meaningful action. Agencies here are not human actors *per se* but in line with the distributed and material conception of agency in ANT, agencies are ‘made up of human bodies but also of prostheses, tools, equipment, technical devices, algorithms, etc. which together constitute ‘agencements’ (Callon, 2005: 4). Agencements, then, are the human and non-human, material, social, technical and textual assemblages which together form the source of all action. In an economic context, market agencements like advertising, are hybrid, collective devices that *do* things, ‘they act or make others act’ (Muniesa et al. 2007: 2).

Considering advertising as an agencement is more than just a clumsy way of saying that its production involves a complex assemblage of different elements. It is a way of signalling the generative force of the connections between these elements. Agencement refers to the connections between a state of affairs – in this case the practice of advertising – and the statements that can be made about it but, importantly, it designates the priority of neither. It is the connections themselves which matter in their production of new meanings or senses which exceed both the original states of affairs and the original statements. If this seems a little abstract it is worth emphasising that what is at stake here is the relationship between description and action, or what Callon (2007) terms, the relationship between statements and their worlds. Agencements include all the material, social, technical elements of a given device or practice and the statements made about that device such that they act in accordance with each other in the way that operating instructions are part of what makes a device work. The relationship between these different elements is performative. A performative act is one that creates a state of affairs by uttering it– as in the archetypal example ‘I pronounce you man and wife’. The statements, knowledges and formulae that underpin given a economic or market practice or device can be considered performative in that they are part of what makes it succeed or fail. Statements, knowledges and formulae, Callon concludes, (2007: 320)

‘discover’ worlds – be they advertising, credit markets or whatever – that are themselves put into motion by the statements describing them. Economies and markets – and to extrapolate advertising and media environments – acquire their form through continual, intensive observation and experimentation. These ongoing adjustments between advertising knowledge and its material practices together make up the collective assembly, the agencement, of advertising.

By highlighting the performative character of the links between elements, agencement marks agency as intricately distributed and continually evolving. At the risk of labouring the example, considered as an agencement Peggy’s pitch works because of the timely coincidence of the different elements. Thus her Popsicle memories, knowledge of religion, her skills and capacities to link these to the brief combine with agency custom and practice, the internal staffing arrangements which place her in the position to lead the pitch, the requisite support from art and account management and the client’s view of the product *etc* to produce a new advertising device. The ‘action’ here, notwithstanding the potency of the brilliant, creative rhetoric, does not spring from a single source.

In the context of media management, agencement calls attention to the hybrid, material and distributed character of advertising work. Advertising workers are not simple intermediaries transferring value and meaning between distinct spheres; rather their labour is immersed in evolving and overlapping networks. Negotiating through these networks involves understanding product and competitor markets, institutional and professional associations, agency organisation and staffing structures, industry standards and conventions etc and how these impact upon advertising work in a rapidly changing environment. These technical and administrative knowledges may be less likely to feature as the stuff of television drama but they are as germane to the bulk of advertising production as the stereotypes about creative talent and elite consumers that have taken centre stage in both dramatic and sociological

portrayals of advertising business.

¹ I use this term very broadly to include a range of critical academic perspectives including media, communication and cultural studies analyses.

² See Mcfall (2004), Leiss et al (2006) for overviews of critique.

³ For a more detailed overview of critique on the illogical juxtaposition of products and meanings or values in advertisements see Mcfall (2004) especially chapters 1, 2 and 6.

⁴ For classic critiques of advertising see eg Packard (1957) Ewen (1976) Williamson (1978); Lasch (1979), Haug (1986), Wernick (1991).

⁵ See Adam Lury (1993), former director of Howell Henry Chaledecotte Lury on guilt and anxiety among practitioners. Matt Soar (2002), himself a former advertising creative, has written on graphic design and the culture jamming movement. For more on culture jamming see <https://www.adbusters.org/>

⁶ Miller & Rose (1990); Callon (1998) and du Gay and Pryke (2002) offer perspectives on the new economic sociology; and see Nixon (1996, 2003); Mcfall (2004) for practice based accounts of advertising.

⁷ This representational labour may equally said to be characteristic of all forms of work including for example accounting and finance. See P. Miller (2008).

⁸ See Law [ed.] (1999) for an introduction to ANT; and Callon [ed.] (1998) and Callon et al. [ed.'s] (2007) for applications to markets.

⁹ For recent applications of the term to financial and consumer markets see Hardie and Mackenzie (2007); Mackenzie et al. (2007), Mcfall (2009).

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3382 total